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Grants Help Optimize Nonprofits' Ability to Aid Community Programs

Deborah M Clubb
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Memphis Area Legal Services and six other nonprofit groups will share more than \$124,000 to help them operate, analyze and plan for growth and survival, thanks to a new focus by the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis.

The seven grants flow from a new Nonprofit Capacity Building program at the foundation, part of a trend among philanthropists to give money to help organizations grow stronger, rather than to the program services they provide.

The Community Foundation program is primarily for well- established nonprofits that may need assistance to take the organization to another level of performance, said foundation executive director Gid Smith.

The MALS grant of \$25,000 annually for three years is called a "bridge" grant to help the nonprofit law firm survive a short-term challenge. MALS earlier this month announced it expects to lose \$200,000 in 2003 and beyond, largely due to a drop in the number of poor people it serves in four counties, according to the latest Census.

The nonprofit law firm has about 40 employees and an annual budget of \$3 million. Last year it received more than 6,000 applications for help and was able to serve 3,421. MALS has appealed to the legal community for funds and greater commitment to pro bono services - donating their expertise to the needy.

The Community Foundation is awarding \$25,000 this year but requiring MALS to submit a three-year fund-raising plan. In the second and third year of the grant, CFGM funds will be awarded as a match, with MALS raising at least \$3 for every \$1 the foundation provides.

In effect, the grant challenges MALS to raise at least \$100,000 a year in 2003 and 2004. Last year, that campaign - primarily among private attorneys - drew less than \$40,000 while the Nashville legal aid fund-raising garnered more than \$500,000.

Harrison D. McIver III, MALS executive director, said the agency was "very gratified" by the Community Foundation's grant. "We have been working very hard to call the legal community's and the public's attention to our funding crisis and its impact on MALS's efforts to secure equal access to justice for our community's poor and elderly residents."